The recent death of H.R.H. Princess Liliane of Belgium at the age of 85 reminded me of her early involvement in the surgical treatment of congenital heart disease and of my visits with her during those times. In 1941, Princess Liliane became the second wife of H.M. King Leopold—3 years after the sad death of his first wife in an automobile accident. Their first child, Prince Alexander, was born with coarctation of the aorta, which was successfully corrected by Dr. Robert Gross at Boston Children's Hospital in about 1958. Prince Alexander's recovery stimulated Princess Liliane's interest in congenital heart disease and led to the establishment of the Fondation Cardiologique Princesse Liliane, which the Princess created to educate the scientific community about congenital heart disease and to provide funds for children who needed operations to correct congenital anomalies.

At the time, several young Belgian surgeons who were on fellowship at the Baylor University College of Medicine were assisting me in congenital surgical procedures at Texas Children's Hospital. When she learned of our successful results, Princess Liliane began sending patients to Houston for surgery. In 1961, she visited Houston and watched an operation on one of her young subjects. She arrived in the O.R. wearing an elaborate diamond necklace and dangling diamond earrings, but her interest in the surgery was intense. One of the Belgian fellows who participated in the operation, Dr. Georges Primo, later introduced open-heart surgery to Brussels and became a prominent member of their cardiovascular surgical community. During her Houston visit, Princess Liliane stated that she would organize a colloquium (symposium) in Brussels to stimulate interest in open-heart surgery.

The symposium took place on 22-25 May 1962 and included many of the prominent cardiologists and cardiovascular surgeons from Europe, America, and the Orient. The faculty was impressive indeed. I was asked to perform a televised repair of tetralogy of Fallot in a child. This was accomplished successfully using a warm, 5% dextrose solution to prime the extracorporeal bypass circuit, to enable maintenance of normal temperature throughout the operation. Ischemic cardiac arrest was obtained by simple aortic cross-clamping. My perfusionist, Mary Martin, RN, accompanied me to Brussels and brought with her a suitcase containing several Travenol disposable, plastic, folding-bag, bubble oxygenators. Successful
operations on patients with tetralogy of Fallot were performed in Brussels with Dr. Primo assisting, and a few days later in Ghent with Dr. Fr. Derom assisting. My lectures at the symposium concerned the safety and advantages of the new, simplified technique of open-heart surgery.

While in Belgium, I was a special guest of Princess Liliane and King Leopold at their elegant home, Château d’Argenteuil, near Waterloo. I enjoyed getting to know them both. At a large, formal banquet on the grounds of the palace, I sat between the Princess and King Leopold. Other houseguests included Mary Lasker and Florence Mahoney of the United States, both of whom were actively lobbying for health-care funding in the U.S. Congress.

One morning during my visit, the Princess invited me to accompany her to a golf club to hit golf balls. She drove us to the club in a Lamborghini convertible—with an impressive ability and at racecar speed. She could hit golf balls better than most men, was accomplished with a shotgun in bird hunting, spoke 4 languages, and was a charming hostess. She was an impressive person.

I also spent leisure time with King Leopold. The King was attractive, well educated, and also an accomplished golfer. The day after hitting balls with Princess Liliane, I was the King’s partner in a golf tournament. The course was located on the actual battlefield of Waterloo. Therefore, I had a personal walking tour of the battlefield with the King as my guide. Several châteaus still existed on the adjacent hill where the commissioned officers of the English, Prussian, and French armies had been billeted. According to the King’s description, the evening before the final battle, the officers—after having dinner, playing cards, and drinking brandy—were informed by an attendant that the battle would commence the following morning at 10:00 A.M. That would give the valets and servants time to groom and saddle the officers’ horses, polish the officers’ boots, and prepare their uniforms. They then mounted their horses and watched the battle from the hillside. At the time, I thought to myself, “How civilized!”

Many Belgians did not believe that Princess Liliane, a commoner, was a suitable wife for their King. Yet, in a sense, she was to the manner born. Her father was a prominent businessman who had risen to become Belgium’s Minister of the Interior and of Agriculture. Mary Liliane Baels (her maiden name) was also suitably educated, and as a young woman had been presented to King George V and Queen Mary of England. In my judgment, Princess Liliane was an attractive and charming person who inspired an interest in the welfare of children born with cardiac defects. Some 25 Belgian children underwent surgery at Texas Children’s Hospital, mostly under her supervision through the Fondation Cardiologique Princesse Liliane. Cardiac surgery in Belgium was stimulated by her efforts and dedication.

Denton A. Cooley, MD,
President and Surgeon-in-Chief,
Texas Heart Institute,
Houston